

**An Examination of Attribution of Blame Attitudes and Disposition  
Recommendations of Police Officers, Protective Service Workers, and Mental  
Health Professionals on Incest Situations**

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RECOMMENDATIONS OF POLICE OFFICERS, PROTECTIVE SERVICE WORKERS AND  
MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS IN INCEST SITUATIONS-Mary Ann Stysliger-  
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RESEARCH PROBLEM

The literature suggested that children's reaction to sexual molestation, including incest, may be related to how professionals respond to them subsequent to the report of the abuse (Sigori, 1983). Yet few studies had examined any of the attitudes of persons employed in the occupations that routinely intervene with incest victims and their families. In addition, within the literature a number of child sexual abuse experts had strongly suggested that specialized incest training was needed to help workers "understand" incest victims and their families; the experts suggested that an increased knowledge base about incest would result in workers changing their attitudes about and behavior toward the victim and the offender. awareness of the dynamics and impact of incest. However, in spite of the amount of resources that were devoted to providing workers with the recommended specialized training, very little research had examined the impact of this type of training.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND QUESTIONS

Some research indicated that the attitude of blame may be related to workers' treatment of incest victims (Jackson, 1983; Ringwaldt, 1985). Furthermore, empirical evidence suggested that certain personal characteristics such as gender, profession and incest case experience were related to the amount of blame attributed to the victim and offender in incest situations (Grannis, 1985; Jackson, 1983). And while the literature suggested that blame attribution was related to disposition recommendations, this had not been tested.

This dissertation had two major purposes. First, it was designed to further the understanding of workers' attribution of blame in incest situations. Second, it examined the significance of blame in comparison to other factors in determining workers' disposition recommendations in incest cases.

METHODOLOGY

The sample included a wider range of occupational groups than had been previously tested; the groups included were: police officers, protective service workers, and mental health professionals. These groups were chosen because all are involved in the identification and handling of incest cases. All subjects were employed in agencies located in a semi-urban county in a northeastern state.

The instrument used included two measures of blame-the Jackson Incest Blame Scale (JIBS) and six incest case vignettes developed by the author. Prior research in this area had only used one measure of blame-an incest blame scale; however, it was reasoned that inclusion of case vignettes would be valuable since they more closely approximate situations workers respond to. Inclusion of case vignettes also allowed the impact of incest victim gender on blame attribution and disposition recommendations to be explored. The study examined and compared with past results, the relationship between attribution of blame and the respondent variables of

gender, occupation, specialized incest training, molestation experience, and incest case experience.

For this study, N=236. This included: 86 police officers (76 males, 8 females), 84 mental health professionals (20 males, 66 females), and 66 protective service workers (16 males, 50 females). Forty-nine persons in the sample reported a molestation experience. JIBS and vignette blame data were analyzed separately.

## RESULTS

For the JIBS data, all but one of the significant findings were identified on the victim subscale. Respondents who reported a molestation experience blamed the victim less than those who did not. Respondents with incest case experience blamed the victim less than those with none; notably, specialized incest training did not impact on blame attribution. Based on past JIBS results it had been predicted that males would attribute more blame to the victim than females; however, two way ANOVAS indicated that this was only true for male and female police officers. Although the victim subscales findings for the male and female police officers supported past JIBS results, data for the mental health professionals and protective service workers did not. Several explanations, including differences between the theoretical orientation, job focus and amount of experience with situations in which children are victimized were discussed as explanations for the findings.

Vignette data indicated that this measure of blame yielded more results than the JIBS. Again, specialized incest training failed to impact on blame. On the vignette offender subscale, mental health professionals attributed more blame to the offender than police officers. Male respondents blamed the incest offender less than female respondents at a level that approached significance. Respondents attributed more blame to the family situation when the vignette victim was female than when the vignette victim was male. Two-way ANOVA data indicated that there was significant interaction between occupation and respondent gender on the victim subscale and as had been the case on the JIBS data, not all male respondents blamed the incest victim significantly more than female respondents. Male police attributed more blame to the incest victim than female police; male mental health professionals attributed more blame to the victim than female mental health professionals. The discussion of these results indicated that male police officers and male mental health professionals may have causal schemata concerning how much the victim is to blame in sexual assault situations and these stereotypes resist change when exposed to specialized incest training without any incest case experience. Data from the vignettes also indicated that victim gender was related to blame attribution. Significant interaction was also identified between respondent gender and vignette victim gender. For vignettes where males were portrayed as the incest victim, female respondents attributed more blame to the family situation than male respondents; also male respondents attributed more blame to the family situation for the occurrence of incest when the vignette victim was female rather than male. These results were discussed in light of other studies that suggested that males may fail to identify with how vulnerable males may be in certain situations.

Disposition data indicated that respondents' gender, occupation, and molestation experience were the variables that were related to the disposition recommendations. Blame attribution proved to have little impact on the recommendations of respondents. Data indicated that the majority of variance for disposition recommendations could not be explained by the variables that were examined in this study.

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### UTILITY FOR PRACTICE

Major implications from the results were discussed. First, the results from the JIBS and the vignette data, combined with those of Grannis (1985), suggested that there is no relationship between amount of blame attributed to the victim, offender, situation, and society and the amount of specialized incest training police officers, protective service workers, and mental health professionals receive. These findings raised serious questions as to whether incest trainings that have been aimed at changing the causal schemata/stereotypes that workers from various occupations have concerning the victim, offender, situation and society are having the intended impact. Results from this and other studies (Grannis, 1985) suggest that amount of incest case experience, not specialized incest training, impacts on the amount of blame attributed to incest victims. Furthermore, the findings suggest that administrators from agencies that intervene with incest situations, would help to ensure more humane, empathic treatment of incest victims by having one or more workers on staff who specialize in intervening with incest situations. Police or mental health agencies whose small size may preclude specialization may benefit from having access to consult with or refer clients to a specialized agency or unit. Results also suggest that, in so far as blame is concerned, workers will not be more or less inclined to blame the victim, offender, situation, and society because they have had a molestation experience. Finally, results from the study suggested that male workers from all three occupations may have difficulties in identifying how vulnerable males may be in different situations. Areas for future research were suggested.